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ABSTRACT

Breaking from traditional adult-centered models of interpersonal conflict by privileging children's experiences, a study examined children's experiences of and reactions to conflict. As part of an assessment for establishing a school-based peer mediation program, focus group interviews were conducted with second graders through high school students (n=47). Analysis focuses on the sites (causes), signs, and aftermath of (or responses to) conflict. Children's impressions regarding fairness, gender differences, as well as the children's metaphors for conflict are addressed. With respect to the sites of conflict, the main themes included conflict as a product of the spoken word, as a dirty look, and as a struggle for equality. The signs of conflict entailed physical acts, name calling, and absence of talk. Aftermath included confronting, seeking involvement of third parties, ignoring others, and treating others with kindness. Two emergent themes regarding fairness were decision making according to the rules, and equality of treatment. Two primary, and in some respects oppositional, metaphors emerged in the group discussions: conflict as explosion and conflict as betrayal. (Contains 52 references, 11 notes, and a table of data. The interview protocol is attached.) (Author/RS)

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"BUTTHEAD", "SWIRLIES", AND DIRTY LOOKS: INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT FROM A YOUNGER POINT OF VIEW

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ABSTRACT

This study breaks from traditional adult-centered models of interpersonal conflict by privileging children's experiences. As part of an assessment for establishing a school-based peer mediation program, focus group interviews were conducted with second graders through high school students. Analysis focuses on the sites (causes), signs, and aftermath of (or responses to) conflict. Children's impressions regarding fairness, gender differences, as well as the children's metaphors for conflict are addressed. With respect to the sites of conflict, the main themes which were found include conflict as a product of the spoken word, as a dirty look, and as a struggle for equality. The signs of conflict entailed physical acts, name calling, and absence of talk. Aftermath included confronting, seeking involvement of third parties, ignoring others, and treating others with kindness. Two emergent themes regarding fairness were decision making according to the rules, and equality of treatment. Finally, the children's metaphors of conflict as explosion and conflict as betrayal are presented.

KEY WORDS: child development, children's conflict, fairness, gender, metaphors

"BUTTHEAD", "SWIRLIES", AND DIRTY LOOKS: INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT FROM A YOUNGER POINT OF VIEW

The alarming rates of physical violence in the classrooms within the United States have captured the attention of more than just police officers. While traditionally considered safe havens, some of our nation's classrooms have become (or are becoming) war zones where children as young as twelve and thirteen are carrying weapons to protect themselves from physical assault (Morganthau, 1992). Metal detectors, armed police officers, search-and-seizure tactics, and shoot-out drills are becoming part of the everyday environment for school children fortunate enough to have such protection (Salholz, 1992).

Although the picture just described would seem to speak exclusively to challenges which exist within inner-city schools, the fact is that any school system, no matter its size or geographic location, can be a site for violence and non-constructive confrontations between youngsters. As a variety of researchers, theorists and educators have observed, children need conflict management skills in order to form and maintain satisfying relationships and operate constructively within society (see, for example, Burleson, 1984; Hartup, Laursen, Stewart, and Eastenson, 1988; Rizzo, 1992; Shantz, 1987). However, the strategies just described for handling these problems, while often deemed essential for establishing a "safe" school environment, do nothing to prepare children, or their teachers, to manage interpersonal conflict before it escalates to such levels of intensity.

Over the past 20 years, the "need" for conflict management skills, combined with concerns about escalating levels of violence, has been responded to by a gradually increasing introduction of dispute resolution and/or peer-mediation programs into public school systems. Recent estimates place the number of operational programs at slightly more than 300 nationwide (Brinkman, 1991). In most instances, the programs which have been introduced into the school systems have been attenuated versions of adult programs present within the community. The school programs have reportedly met with very encouraging success (e.g., lowering truancy rates, reducing disciplinary problems); however, the fact that

their designs began with adult models rather than with a critical assessment of the needs of children (and analysis of the nature of children's conflicts) suggests the possibility that we might be overlooking even more effective and appropriate approaches to meeting children's needs and expectations. Jones and Brinkman (1993) go so far as to assert that "a review of most peer mediation programs suggests that they could be improved by understanding how children deal with conflict and designing programs accordingly" (p. 1).

While a variety of explanations (and justifications) could probably be offered for the reliance on adult models, we believe that Blitzer (1991) offers a very compelling thesis when she argues that:

> . . . the prevailing tendency in the social sciences [is] to look at children "from the outside," making them the objects of study while failing to incorporate into theory children's own views of society. As with studies of women before their concerns became issues for public debate, it is assumed that children do not have legitimate perceptions or world views independent from those of adults. . . . The commonly held assumption is that children are not prepared to produce original opinions about any issue which legitimizes their role as passive objects of investigation and care. (p. 12)

In embracing this view, we also find ourselves drawn to the argument which follows. Specifically, that there is a need "to avoid an authority fallacy or the belief in adults as the only segment of the population capable of expressing valuable ideas" (Blitzer, 1991, p. 12). Thus, we approach our interest in children's conflicts from a stance which attempts to priviledge the points of view of the participants rather than the views of the researchers. The purpose of the research reported in this paper is to provide an analysis and discussion of data collected as part of a research project focusing on children's experiences of and reactions to interpersonal conflict. Our emphasis in this particular analysis is on the conflicts which children encounter or engage in with each other on a daily basis. Through an examination of data collected in focus group discussions, we hope to provide a better understanding of how children (at least within the school system we studied) define and think about interpersonal conflict.

RESEARCHING CHILDREN'S CONFLICTS

Since the intent of this project was to obtain a better understanding of the "lived experience" (see Denzin, 1989; van Manen, 1990) of children's conflicts with each other, the appropriate starting point would seem to be with a comprehensive orientation to the nature of children's interactions and what is known about children's conflicts. Those lines of research and theory development have, however, already been thoroughly reviewed by others (see, for example, Hartup et al., 1988; Jones, 1991; Laursen, 1993; Maccoby, 1990a, 1990b; Maynard, 1985; Rizzo, 1992; Shantz, 1987; Sheldon, 1992). Perhaps more important, any review of the literature, like those just cited, would be seated largely in work which has been conducted via either quasi-experimental/experimental designs (see, for example, Benton, 1971; Ferguson and Rule, 1988; Hicks and Lawrence, 1993; Underwood, Coie and Herbsman, 1992) or analysis of observed behaviors (see, for example, Barner-Barry, 1986; Dorval and Gundy, 1990; Fabes and Eisenberg, 1992; Hartup, French, Laursen, Johnston and Ogawa, 1993; Hartup et al., 1988; Humphreys and Smith, 1987; Katriel, 1991; Sheldon, 1992).

Our intention in this research effort is to have children and adolescents offer their own observations concerning their experience of conflict. This approach of having children and adolescents speak for themselves constitutes the exception rather than the norm (see Brown and Gilligan, 1991 for an exemplar of the very limited work which does focus on children's own voices concerning conflict). However, as Carbaugh (1988) argues, if the intent is to understand persons' actions "from their point of view, one should listen for the terms they use to discuss it" (p. 217). Thus, the appropriate approach with respect to establishing a foundation for this research would seem to lie in outlining the issues and understandings which led us to the focal questions posed to our "co-researchers." In essence, those questions began with the issue of the "meaning" of conflict for our participants and extended through to their understandings of what "fair" means within conflictual situations.

Typically, research/theory development concerning children's communication and children's relationships has adult concepts and understandings as its foundation. If we accept that model, then conflict is defined as *"an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from the other party in achieving their goals"* (Hocker and Wilmot, 1991, p. 12, italics in original). Focusing more specifically on children, researchers have tended to describe conflict as existing when "child A does or says something that influences child B, child B resists, and child A persists" (Shantz, 1987, p. 284) or as involving influence attempts between children that continue beyond one instance of resistance (Hartup et al., 1988; O'Keefe and Benoit, 1982).

Despite the logic and defensibility of the definitions just presented, typically such definitions do not begin from nor emphasize the perspectives of children. They function, instead, as guideposts for researchers whose agendas require that they bring to their projects clear specifications of the felicity conditions which describe the "objects" of their interest. It is conceivable that situations and interactions which an adult would label "conflict" might be viewed differently by children (especially young children), and vice versa. Shantz (1987), for example, distinguishes between conflict and aggression, arguing that "most conflict does not involve aggression" (p. 285) and that aggressive behavior is only one out of many possible responses to a conflictful situation. At what is, perhaps, the other end of the continuum, Smith, Bowers, Binney and Cowie (1993) discuss the elements which distinguish "*playful teasing*" from "*bullying*." Whether children, in their talk about conflict, draw similar distinctions is not known. It is certainly conceivable that children might view the experience of conflict (in terms of their own and others' strategies for handling conflicts, as well as both the benefits and the drawbacks of being in conflict) in different senses than would an adult. Therefore, one of the concerns which we had as we approached this research was in discovering what the children we were speaking with **meant** when they used the term "conflict."

A second concern was seated in the general area of children's responses to conflict episodes and the impact of those episodes on their social relationships. Whatever the "meaning" of the term for children, their interpersonal relationships are usually characterized as highly competitive and involving a great deal of conflict (see, for example, Hartup, et al., 1988). Rather than functioning in a negative fashion, however, both competition and conflict are typically viewed as playing (or at least as having the potential to play) a variety of positive roles in the development of the child. This is especially true of those theories which draw upon the work of Piaget (1967; Piaget and Inhelder, 1969) for their foundation. Labov (1972a, 1972b) and Maynard (1985), for example, argue that conflict plays a significant role in children's acquisition of a sense of social order, while Gilligan (1982) underscores the central position which conflict occupies in the acquisition of communicative ability and in the development of moral reasoning.

An individual's ability to respond in conflictual situations develops over time. As children age, they have been found to demonstrate pro-social behaviors reflecting an increasing cognitive ability to be other-oriented. Throughout research on children's developmental communicative abilities we continue to see that, as children mature, they move from an egocentric pattern of behavior to a pattern that is adapted to the needs and perspectives of others (see, for example, Elkind, 1967; Elliott, 1979, 1981; Looft, 1972). In the sociolinguistic tradition, Sheldon (1992) refers to this dual orientation toward one's own agenda and to other's agendas as "double-voice discourse."

As is true of any social skill, the ability to manage conflicts (and to engage in double-voice discourse) is learned, or acquired, as opposed to innate. Clark and her colleagues (Clark, O'Dell, and Willihnganz, 1986; Clark, Willihnganz, and O'Dell, 1985) argue that at least three elements comprise the process of social skill acquisition. First, the child must develop the necessary communicative/social strategies. Second, the child must develop an understanding of the circumstances under which any particular strategy should (or should not) be employed. Finally, the child must develop the ability to

generate appropriate instantiations of the strategy. Thus, a young child might be unable to use a particular persuasive strategy within a conflict situation either because (1) he/she has not yet acquired that strategy, or (2) even though the child possesses the strategy, he/she does not recognize/understand that the current situation is appropriate for the use of that strategy, or (3) despite the possession of a general strategy and the knowledge that the current situation calls for the use of that strategy, the child might be unable to generate an exemplification of the strategy. The foregoing led us to wonder about the kinds of conflict management differences which we might observe across the various grade levels. Specifically, we were interested in how our research participants at the different grade levels would describe the sites (causes), signs, and aftermath (or responses) of the conflicts they had experienced.

In addition to developmental differences, differences between boys and girls are often the focus of research attention (see, for example, Gilligan, 1982; Gottman and Carrere, in press; Maccoby, 1990a, 1990b). This research is not without areas of debate/disagreement. More importantly (and unfortunately), the assessment of "difference" in conflict management styles is often based on an assumption that there is one most appropriate style. For instance, girls have traditionally been assessed as less competent because they tend to use compromise or avoidance strategies, while boys are assessed as more competent because they are more assertive and confrontational (Sheldon, 1992). Moreover, there is at least some measure of confusion as to whether the research being conducted and conclusions being drawn speak to differences attributable to biological gender or to social expectations and socialized (culturally sanctioned) behavior patterns. Despite our concerns about fueling discussions of difference which necessarily value the behaviors/perspectives of one sex/gender versus another, we did think it appropriate to wonder whether boys and girls would differ from each other in the ways that they discussed conflict. We also thought it appropriate to ask whether the participants in our discussions were cognizant of any differences between boys and girls as well as exploring their perceptions of the approaches which boys and girls take in conflict situations.

Finally, over the past ten years, growing attention and research in the area of procedural justice (see, for example, Lind, Lissak, and Conlon, 1983; Lind and Tyler, 1988; Thibaut, Walker, LaTour, and Houlden, 1974; and the journal entitled Social Justice Research) has stirred interest in the concept of "fairness." Broadly stated, the thesis of this research has been that, within typical decision making/conflict situations, individuals are concerned with being treated in a manner which can be characterized as fair. Further, there are two dimensions which form the basis of judgements concerning a fair response to any conflict: (1) the quality/nature of the eventual outcome or decision which is made, and (2) the procedures or processes which describe how the eventual decision was made or the conflict handled (Lind and Tyler, 1988).[1]

Little research has focused specifically on children's perceptions of fairness (Hicks and Lawrence, 1993; Rider-Hankins, 1992). In their noteworthy work on narratives and storytelling, Brown and Gilligan (1991) provide an illustration of one young girl's struggle with a relational conflict and with her determination of what would be a fair (or justified, appropriate) response to that conflict. While we thought it reasonable to assume that children would be familiar with the concept of fairness, we wondered what that concept would mean to them. That is, what would be their perceptions/definitions of fairness and their understanding of what it means to be fair within conflictual situations.

APPROACH TO THE RESEARCH

We began this research with three general issues in mind: (1) what meaning does the term "conflict" hold for a selected group of children, (2) in what ways might that meaning and children's acknowledged responses to conflicts change dependent on age and/or biologic sex of the children, and (3) what does it mean to be "fair" within the context of a conflict. Byers and Wilcox (1990) argue that focus groups constitute a viable method for conducting communication research, especially when the intent of that research is to explore what a group of "lay persons" know about an issue or topic. For that

reason, in addition to the belief that the participants in our study would be less inhibited in a group context than in one-on-one interviews, we elected to use focus groups as our approach to obtaining information.

The particular school system selected as the site for this research was chosen, at least in part, because of its geographic convenience. The school system is located in a rural area within the mid-eastern United States in a region recognized as part of Appalachia.[1] While the community enjoys a modicum of ethnic/racial diversity, that is primarily due to the influence of faculty members and international students at a local university. There are a total of 5 public elementary schools, 1 middle school (housing grades seven and eight), and one high school. During the academic year when this study was being conducted, the school system was serving a total of 4,800 students.[2] In our discussions with some of the teachers who work within the school system, a variety of approaches (or ideas) were shared as they explained how they handle and/or teach about conflict. However, at the time of the study, the school system was not served by a uniform, system-wide conflict management or peer mediation program.[3]

With the cooperation and assistance of the superintendent as well as officials at each of the schools selected for participation, parents/guardians of children in grades one through high school were contacted via letter and asked for their permission in having their son and/or daughter take part in a group discussion concerning interpersonal conflict. The letter explained that their child's particular discussion group would involve only youngsters who were the same general age[4] and in the same school as their child. The letter further clarified that the specific focus of the discussion which was to occur would be on children's conflicts with each other (as opposed to conflicts with teachers or within the child's family).

Two of the five elementary schools were designated for participation in the study. One of the elementary schools is within the primary city limits, while the other elementary school is in a small community outside the city limits. In many respects, these two elementary schools reflect the full

spectrum of the community, both economically and socially/culturally. By way of illustration with respect to this point, at the elementary school within the city, approximately 18% of the students qualified for either the free or the reduced price lunch program. At the elementary school in the neighboring community, almost 56% of the students qualified for those programs.

At the elementary school within the city limits, the parental permission letters previously mentioned were sent to parents of children in the second, fourth, and sixth grades. At the elementary school in the community outside the city limits, permission letters were sent to parents of children in the first, third, and fifth grades. Despite repeated attempts, we received only one signed permission slip from the parent/guardian of a first grader; therefore, no first graders were included within this study. In almost every other case, we had more than enough students to compose our groups. The students who were ultimately selected were done so randomly, except that we tried to ensure an even number of boys and girls, and tried not to repeat students from the same family.

With respect to the middle school, school officials identified for us students whom they believed would be willing to take active roles within a focus group and express opinions concerning student conflicts. We specified that we were interested in obtaining participation from a broad selection of students, i.e., both boys and girls, students representing a variety of ethnic/racial groups, students known for participating frequently in conflicts and those who seemed capable of avoiding conflict. After the school officials identified students whom they believed met our needs, cover letters and permission forms were addressed and, through the student, delivered to the parents and, then, returned to the school.[5]

At the high school, yet another approach was used. The school counselor had, in place, a group composed of students who met regularly to discuss a wide variety of topics (e.g., alcoholism, drug abuse, divorce, teenage pregnancy). We were invited to contact the parents/guardians of these students and, with the students whose parents/guardians granted permission, use one of their regular group sessions in order to conduct our discussion concerning conflict.

Table #1 provides a summary of the composition of the groups which ultimately met, indicating the number and sex of the students in each focus group. In a very few cases (particularly with respect to the middle school), absences negatively impacted the number of students who actually took part in the discussions.

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insert Table #1 about here

Prior to beginning the focus group discussions, we explained the purpose of the study and responded to any questions which the children/participants had. Although we already had parental/guardian permission for them to participate in the study, we asked for each child's assent, symbolized by his/her signature on an assent form. The right to not respond to any question and to withdraw from participation at any time were carefully explained to each group of participants.

In the cases of the focus group discussions conducted with second and third graders, we began the process by showing a clip from the Disney animated movie *Beauty and the Beast*.[6] The decision to show this film clip was based on an expectation that most of the students would have seen the movie (which they had) and that this would be a good vehicle for introducing the subject matter of conflict and focusing their attention on that issue. With the older students, no such focusing device was deemed necessary.

The same basic interview protocol (see Appendix A) was employed with all of the focus groups. While we tried to insure that the questions on this protocol were covered in each group, we also pursued other relevant lines of inquiry emerging during the course of the discussion. The basic protocol asked for students to first define for us the kinds of things that cause them to not get along with their friends or with other students at their school. We discovered that we needed to prompt different groups, especially about non-playground conflicts. A variety of questions were asked concerning what happens when a conflict occurs (or when they are not getting along with friends). We asked about any differences which exist in the kinds of conflicts experienced/engaged in by girls versus those experienced/engaged

in by boys. With each focus group, we asked the students who they go to for advice and what kinds of advice (or lessons) they typically receive. We asked the students to pretend that they were teachers and to tell us what they would teach us about conflict. We also asked them what they would like us to teach them about conflict.[7] Finally, we asked them to define the concept of "fair" for us.

The focus group discussions were both video taped and audio taped. The intent of this approach was to help us (1) try to insure that we had clear recordings of what was said, and (2) have confidence in our ability to distinguish which participant made which statement. The focus group discussions lasted approximately 40 minutes, with the precise amount of time determined primarily by the demands of the individual school schedule. Transcriptions of the discussions were prepared and used as to aid the analysis presented here.[8]

Brown and Gilligan (1991) argue that a researcher should "'listen to' a person's story *four* different times" (p. 45, italics in original). The first time, the listener should attend to the story itself. The second time, the listener should listen for "self" (or the "I" who is sharing the story). The third and fourth frames for listening emerge from notions of a "resisting listener" who "listens against the conventions of the dominant culture" (p. 47). Specifically, Brown and Gilligan advocate attempting to identify elements in the narrative which:

> speak about love (care) and about justice (equality/fairness). A resisting listener attempts to identify these two voices and to distinguish when these relational voices reflect societal conventions of female and male behavior, that is, when they are narrowed and distorted by gender stereotypes, or used to justify distancing, neglect, subordination or oppression, and when they represent relationships that are healthy, freeing, or, in today's vernacular, "empowering." (pp. 47-48)

In this vein, our approach to analyzing the voices of our participants involved, first, reviewing the transcripts both individually and in meetings with each other. We reflected not only on the kinds of information shared in the written record but our memories of the focus groups themselves and

impressions of what had occurred. We organized our analysis around the general questions already identified, specifically: (1) what was the **meaning** of the term "conflict" for our focus group members, (2) what differences and similarities emerged in the **voices** which we heard from both boys and girls, and (3) what did our participants consider to be **fair**.

ANALYSIS OF FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

We began each of our focus groups by asking a variety of questions concerning the sites, signs, and aftermath of conflict. We did not ask our participants to define the term "conflict," per se. Our belief (stemming from recommendations regarding ethnographic interviewing techniques, cf., Spradley, 1979) was that a more appropriate approach existed in having our participants talk about conflict as opposed to engaging in definitions or attempting to simply describe the concept, itself. In that vein, we began with questions about the causes of conflict and, eventually, led to questions about conflict resolution.

The Meaning of Conflict: Sites (Causes)

Because of the approach selected for collecting data, we did not deem it appropriate to try to develop a typology of conflict causes (or circumstances, strategies, etc.). Instead, as we examined what our participants said, we tried to identify themes or clusters of episodes/interpretations which would enhance our understanding of conflict as it has been experienced by our participants. With respect to the issue of the sites (or causes) of conflict, the themes which we identified centered around conflict as a product of the **spoken word**, conflict as a **dirty look**, and conflict as a struggle for **equality**.

Conflict as a product of the spoken word. The causes of conflict for our focus group members tended to have a distinctly verbal flavor, with name calling and verbal put-downs apparently common throughout the grade levels. Among our second graders, the name calling included such epithets as *"pooh-pooh," "butthead," "stupid,"* and *"the sh-word."* Ethnic slurs were also in operation as one of our second grade participants complained of occasionally being called *"Iraq boy."* As name calling

becomes more sophisticated, it is transformed into the experience of being *"picked on."* In this case, children often choose one or two particular names which are personalized in order to highlight an individual's personal or physical characteristics. In this sense, nicknames, such as *"fatso"* and *"carrot-top,"* begin to emerge. One sixth grader complained:

> *What makes me mad, in fourth grade, this kid called me "Lenny" and I hated that name. My last name is "Kenny" and he kept calling me "Lenny." He still calls me that whenever he gets mad at me.*[9]

Although most of the name calling might seem to be harmless teasing, for our younger focus group participants, offensive nicknames and name calling create a context in which retaliation is almost obligatory. One third grader argued that, *"whenever someone calls you a name, you feel like you have to do something."* By contrast, for our older group members, seriousness was introduced only when the name calling was coupled with the use of profanities or contemptuous statements concerning the individual's social or reference groups. Unfortunately, the ability to use *"unmentionable words"* (as our participants referred to them) seemed well-developed by the upper grade levels. Thus, there was a sense of increasing sophistication, and damage, associated with the act of name calling.

As might be expected (see, for example, the work of Labov, 1972a, on "sounding") not all name calling and verbal invective had the recipient of the attack as its ostensible subject matter. A discussion among our sixth grade students illustrates the point:

ER: *What kinds of conflicts tend to make you stay mad longer?*

M2[10]: *When someone starts talking bad about your parents, your mother especially. I've gotten in fist fights over my mom. It's like fireworks.*

M1: *In third and fourth grade especially, people would say things about your mom.*

ER: *Do people still do that?*

M1: *Some, not many. The difference is that back then it was "your mom's ugly" and now it's unmentionable words.*

M3: *It cracks me up. It just sounds like something a younger person would say.*

F3: *Someone used to say my mom walked the streets at night. . . . Someone also said she was going out with the mailman.*

ER: *Did you laugh at that?*

F3: *No. I punched him.*

Our high school students also mentioned verbal attacks directed at the individual's mother; however, by this point in their lives, such attacks were rarely treated seriously:

F1: *Where I'm from, it's "your mother" everything. It's like your mother's this or that and I'd say, "but I thought you were arguing with me!"*

M1: *A lot of people do that. I think it's more jokingly now, especially my classes. I've done it, too, but jokingly, in fun. People hear stuff, from different comedy shows on TV, and you have to share that with everybody else.*

ER: *How do you react when somebody starts doing that to you?*

F1: *It just kind of goes back and forth. Not usually very seriously. . . . You say, "oh, I was just kidding" that it was just a joke. And usually they're mad for a while, and that's about it.*

Verbal causes of conflict were not limited to name calling. Throughout the grade levels, rumors were also mentioned. As can be gathered from the children's descriptions, rumors are usually understood to involve more than three people, are designed to put down or degrade the subject of the rumor (i.e., to *"get the person in trouble"*), and are essentially false in nature. One third grade girl described the rumor process as follows: *"like, in lunch, when people say stuff about other people and pass rumors around. And then, um, if the person hears about it, then they'll get real mad and fight over it."*

By the time of high school, the rumor process seems to have changed very little:

F1: *There are a lot of rumors going around and I think that causes a lot of problems. When you hear, "this person said that" and you know it's not true.*

ER: *What kind of rumors are going around?*

F1: *Things just get twisted around, just about anything. Like, "this person did this" or "said that about you."*

ER: *Can you tell me the content of those rumors?*

M1: *It's kind of rude, stereotyping. People do it a lot just to get a rise out of someone.*

Certainly, a logical question is, if the participants in this study (and, one would assume, their school colleagues/friends) find rumors to be so distasteful and problematic, then why do they engage in them? Perhaps the answer lies within a statement made by one of the high school girls:

> *People are nosy around here. No one understands that you have to mind your own business. It's like take care of your own before someone stabs you in the back. . . . Instead of going straight to the person, you usually won't get a straight answer anyways, you ask somebody else, "well, did she really say that?" And, if she did, it's like instant fight, you know? You're no longer friends. You're not talking anymore, and you just tell people that something's going on.*

In other words, rumors are the product of a "natural" curiosity about everyone else's business. Perhaps implied in statements of this nature is the fact that gossiping constitutes "something to do." In addition, the activity of gossip is supported (or "justified") by a lack of trust that direct communication will result in truth.

While not mentioned as frequently as either name calling or rumors, threats were occasionally cited as something that might cause a conflict. For one fourth grade boy, conflict occurs *"when they say 'I'm going to get you for that!'"* Perhaps the most intriguing discussion of threats occurred with one of our middle school groups. We had finished the formal group discussion but, rather than return to class, the students "volunteered" to stay and continue talking with us about life in the middle school. At one point,

we asked what they thought high school would be like. The group members began to share a variety of stories they had each been told about freshman "initiation ceremonies." These stories included threats of being beaten up, of being thrown in a pond at the high school, and of receiving a *"swirlie"* (i.e., being held upside down, having your head lowered into a toilet and having the toilet flushed). While this verbal hazing was of some concern (and one group member claimed to have already been the victim of high school student hazing), the majority of our middle school group members viewed these threats more as rumors, designed to scare them (and establish superiority over them) in the same sense as the rumors they told about the transition from elementary school to middle school.

Conflict as a Dirty Look (and other nonverbal intrusions). While verbal sources dominated the causes of conflict, another source lay in a collection of nonverbal "intrusions," with the list of these intrusions led by dirty looks. One fourth grader referred to *"bad expressions"* while, for a middle school girl, the best way to survive at her school was *"don't look at people the wrong way."* One middle school boy claimed that, at least for him, *"dirty looks"* were a more powerful and provocative stimulus for conflict than name calling. By chance, in the other middle school discussion group, we had someone who viewed himself as a victim of the boy in our earlier group. When asked about the cause of the conflict between the two of them, the second boy said:

> *I never made any actual interaction like talking to him. It's like, all of a sudden, you walk out of the lunchroom up to the gym and all of a sudden start hearing swearing and everything like, "Hey, do you want to fight me?" and you're hoping he won't because he's not worth a suspension.*

In addition to dirty looks, a variety of "physical intrusions" (such a *"kicking," "hitting," "pushing,"* and *"spitting"*) were mentioned not only as signs that a conflict existed but as causes of conflict. With respect to our primary school participants, the physical nature of the causes of conflict was related to the context in which the conflict occurred, specifically, the playground. As our third graders explained to us in the following exchange, the presence of a teacher in the classroom and the teacher's ability to

sanction "inappropriate" behavior (as opposed to the relative freedom enjoyed on the playground) serve as at least partial constraints with respect to the sites for conflict:

ER: *I'm curious. You seem to like conflict. It seems useful to you. Does it help you? Is it that big a deal?*

M1: *No.*

ER: *But to your teachers it is.* [Group affirms.] *Why does it bug teachers?*

F1: *Because she don't know if you're gonna fight or not.*

M1: *And if you wait till the teacher is far enough away, you can hit each other.*

M2: *She won't hear for a minute.*

F1: *But it's not right to do stuff behind the teacher's back. If you do, you get in trouble.*

Context also played a role in what our older participants had to say. Specifically, within the high school focus group, the crowded conditions of the school were viewed as contributing in a significant manner to the presence of conflict:

M2: *The halls are so crowded, and now they had to line them with lockers because of freshmen. So, you're like cattle. One person pushes another, and you just go off.*

Several of the high school students spoke of a *"dreary"* atmosphere and that being in school was *"like being in a prison."* One of the boys complained that *"it just seems impossible to get out, and fighting is one of the ways."*

The final nonverbal intrusion which should be discussed involves a variety of activities which our focus group members viewed as interfering with their work as students. As evidenced in their list of conflict-producing situations, our second graders appeared to be particularly sensitive to these types of situations:

M3: *Sometimes when someone copies off my work and then I get in trouble because the teacher thinks I'm copying off them.*

F2: *When we're in reading group and someone takes your chair.*

F3: *When you're doing your work and somebody starts bothering you. . . The people behind you start talking to people and making noise.*

ER: *Whispering?*

F3: *They don't whisper. They ask stupid questions like, "can we go to lunch now?" when we just got back from recess or something like that. . . .*

Our older students did not mention similar concerns. As a matter of fact, one of our third graders claimed an interesting "benefit" from being in a conflict: *"you get a broken jaw and then you get to go home."* In a similar sense, one of our middle school participants bragged of bringing a *"lethal weapon"* (specifically, a knife) to school and claimed that his objective in taking this action had been to get expelled. (He expressed sincere disappointment with the school's decision to make him serve detention rather than expelling him.)

Conflict as a Struggle for Equality. A significant factor in children's conflicts is the need to create (or respond to claims of) superiority. Certainly, the experience of not being as good as, or of being not good enough, is closely associated with put-downs and name calling. In this sense, among the common antecedents to children's conflicts are expressions of superiority and feelings of inferiority. A fluid hierarchy appears to exist wherein children can be up or down, "bossing" or being bossed, better than or worse than others within their environment.

Comments concerning this situation first emerged with our second graders (*"When some of my friends start getting bossy, I just say 'don't play with me anymore'"*) and extended through all the grade levels. One sixth grade boy complained:

Some kids think that they're supremo over all the others because they're bigger, and we're not very big, and we play basketball, and they think they're the best, and we've got someone like that and we get into a lot of fights.

Our younger children, in particular, described several incidents wherein recess was experienced as a very turbulent time. Conflicts arose over stealing balls, which student was "in charge" of the balls (and, thus, had the "trust" or "approval" of the teacher), the order/position of play in various games, and the rules of play. Playground conflicts were occasionally described as reflections of the popularity (or status) of the participants. As one second grade girl explained: *"when you're playing four square and some kids want to be 'A' all the time and then they'll kick you out because they don't like you."*

The playground was not the only arena where theft and struggles with popularity occurred. When asked about the types of conflicts which make kids maddest and keep them mad for a longer period of time, two of our sixth graders responded immediately by saying *"[when] somebody steals a friend."* Such thefts appeared to establish a sense of hierarchy or superiority based on social acceptance. Of course, at the upper grade levels, the problem of this type of theft was not limited to friendship triangles but included romantic attachments, as our middle school students explained:

F1: *[Conflicts occur] like, when they think you're flirting with their boyfriend or something.*

F2: *Or if you don't like your best friend's boyfriend. Then she gets mad at you and calls you names.*

At the level of our high school students, the superiority/inferiority dynamic seemed to involve interpersonal jealousy and mark conflicts which were out of control:

F1: *Out of frustration, anger, a lot of times people say things that they'll regret later on. . . .*

M1: *Yeah. I watch it happen and think, "you guys are sad."*

ER: *You've got to give me a little more details here.*

M1: *Just insults. Degrading remarks. Make the other person look smaller and weaker.*

F3: *I saw a girl once, she was in a fight with her friend, and the girl was insulting everyone, not just the [other] girl, but her friends and boyfriend.*

Occasionally, the comments offered spoke to the fact that conflicts are not always kept on a private level. Instead, a conflict can be precipitated by criticisms of one's friends (e.g., *"sometimes, when people are talking about your friends, you get mad too"*--middle school girl), and/or a student can be drawn into a friend's conflicts. Our fourth graders spoke of *"being pulled in"* to conflicts involving their friends. For our middle school participants, the term used was *"ganging up."* A key difference between the experiences of the primary school children and the middle school children seemed to lie in the number of people involved in this process (with the numbers escalating in the later grades). According to one middle school boy, *"if he has people gang up on me I'll have people gang up on them!"*

In ganging up, the number of people on someone's "side" apparently serves as an indication of the merits of that person's position. Ganging up divides those involved according to both issues and people/ groups. Thus, in a subtle fashion, social hierarchies are maintained so that the person with the most friends/supporters on his/her side is the "winner." The numbers allow for intimidation, especially of children who are loners or who have few friends. As one sixth grader explained, *"when there are people with lots of friends, they pick on you more."*

Fortunately, at least within this school system, for all the talk and intimidation associated with ganging up, actual physical confrontations involving large numbers of students were thought to be relatively rare.[11] According to one middle school girl: *"Sometimes it's only like one-on-one, but it depends. If they get people, then you get people. There's hardly ever fights, just a lot of talk."* Ganging up, for this group of students, seems to be an event which solidifies friendship ties and demonstrates popularity (ergo, power and/or strength).

The Meaning of Conflict: Signs

Quite logically, many of the causes of conflict were also signs that a conflict existed. Thus, especially for our primary school participants, the physical acts of hitting, kicking, pushing, etc., were discussed both as precipitators of and as indicators of the presence of conflict. Similarly, while dirty

looks provoked conflicts among our middle school students, such expressions signified conflict among our younger participants, and name calling emerged not only as a stimulus for conflict but a sign of its existence. As one sixth grade boy explained: *"When my friend and me fight, every time we pass each other in the halls, we call each other unrepeatable [names]. . . [and] tackle people, too."* For our high school students, facial expressions and changes in tone/atmosphere were described as clear markers of the presence of a conflict. As they described it:

M1: *Tone changes.*

F2: *Attitude. Everybody gets quiet. No one talks about the things they usually talk about.*

F3: *Facial expressions. Tension. . . . You just know it. You feel it.*

F2: *The whole attitude changes. Like you'll just get this cold breeze.*

F1: *Sounds funny, but it's true.*

M1: *It's like, get them before they get you.*

With all of the verbal sparring which apparently characterizes children's experiences of conflict, it might seem ironic that the absence of talk emerged as a prominent signal that a conflict exists. However, children across all the grade levels mentioned that *"ignoring people"* and *"not talking"* were primary indications that they were not getting along with another child. As two of our sixth graders explained in response to the question *"how can you tell when somebody is upset with you"*:

F1: *They don't talk to you.*

F2: *Or, whey you try to talk to them, they'll like snap back at you.*

F1: *It's different things for different people.*

M2: *This one kid who thinks he's supremo, whenever you try to stop him from bragging, he just says something really mean. You can't even talk to him, it's so bad.*

The Meaning of Conflict: Aftermath

There appeared to be four general themes guiding what our participants told us about their responses to interpersonal conflicts (i.e., the "aftermath" of entering into a conflict): confront, seek the involvement of third parties, avoid, and treat with kindness. Evidence of each of the four were found across the grade levels; however, among our older students (especially at the high school level), acts of kindness were treated with suspicion and general disdain. Thus, such acts were represented as rare.

Confrontations assumed both positive and negative guises. The positive side included attempts to apologize and direct attempts at discovering the source of the conflict as well as finding a collaborative solution. According to one of our sixth grade boys: *"You try to just sit down and talk to them. Tell them the bad things they've done, the bad things you've done. Try to just say you're sorry."* While most of us would assess this as a positive (i.e., constructive) response to interpersonal conflict, a different perspective emerged in one of our middle school groups:

ER: *What might you do to make up?*

M1: *Tell them you're sorry.*

F1: *But then you're sucking up to them.*

A few minutes later, the boy (M1) in this group indicated his belief that attempts to talk with the other person should be avoided since *"that would probably make [the conflict] worse."*

On the negative side (at least from the typical perspective of an adult) were physical confrontations and shouting matches. One sixth grade girl admitted that *"sometimes we just fight each other, you know, when we're really mad, just to get it out."* Our middle school students observed that:

F1: *Sometimes people [seek conflict] for fun, just to pick on people and to impress their friends.*

ER: *Do you think it makes anyone feel better?*

F1: *Wouldn't make me feel better.*

M1: *Doesn't really bother me.*

F1: *Sometimes, we become friends after a fight.*

The involvement of third parties emerged in two ways: enlisting the help of friends and enlisting the assistance of teachers. As already noted, our participants spoke freely about the processes of *"being pulled into"* the conflicts of their friends and, at the upper grade levels, the act of *"ganging up."* Our participants also spoke about the roles which teachers occupied in the conflict management process. In a very few cases, intervention by a teacher was described as positive. More typically, the involvement of a teacher was described as problematic. Students who take their interpersonal conflicts to a teacher were described as *"tattletales"* (first mentioned by our fourth graders). According to our middle school participants, the best efforts of teachers/administrators only fuels the intensity of the conflict:

M1: *As [a school official] tries to throw water on the fire, she's actually pouring gas because the person just gets madder because you're busting them.*

F1: *And the other student's in there when you're there.*

M1: *And, so, he gets madder than he was before.*

Thus, at least for the participants in our focus groups, obtaining adult assistance/guidance with respect to handling an interpersonal conflict is, itself, a very conflictual situation.

Avoiding or ignoring the other person was, perhaps, the most frequently mentioned approach to handling interpersonal conflicts. From our third graders (*"leave each other alone for a while"*) through our middle school students (*"you just have to let them do what they want for a while"*), avoiding the other person was seen as a fundamental component of conflict management. Only our high school group seemed sensitive to any problems which might be created through a strategy of silence:

ER: *How do you know when a conflict is over?*

M1: *You're not thinking about what's behind you.*

F1: *I guess if it's between two people, you just start talking again, not avoiding each other.*

F2: *Sometimes if you don't know, you'll have to bring it up again. Or, one day they'll bring up something you've forgotten about and it starts all over.*

ER: *So, you never really resolve a conflict?*

F2: *Yeah.*

Finally, acts of kindness directed toward the other person were mentioned; however, they were much more prevalent in the primary grade levels than either the middle school or the high school. The acts which were mentioned including doing favors, writing a letter of apology, doing *"something nice,"* and/or giving the other person a compliment. These acts, while not addressing the source of the conflict, appeared to serve as implicit forms of apology and indications of a continuing friendship.

The Voices of Conflict

In each of our focus groups, we asked the participants about their perceptions of the ways that both boys and girls handle conflict. We also attempted, in reviewing the transcripts, to exercise sensitivity with respect to similarities and differences in the voices of our male focus group members and our female focus group members.

As they spoke of how males handle conflict, the male and female participants in this study were fairly consistent (from elementary school to high school) in claiming that boys were more likely to engage in physical aggression and to be verbally abusive. For our fifth grade boys, conflicts centered around sports--who was bigger or better, whether someone was cheating, and who should be on what team. A sixth grade girl observed that *"sometimes boys are a lot more rough, fights, pushing each other down. Boys get really physical playing basketball; they pile up on each other."* The high school participants also observed that males were more likely to hit one another (although some females were cited as likely to engage in physical aggression). In essence, for males conflict was expressed as competitive. As one high school boy put it, *"guys are more prone to do anything to make the other guy step down first."*

Methods for responding to conflicts were portrayed as very mixed. Our younger boys (second and third graders) described themselves as handling conflicts by apologizing, shaking hands, giving a hug, paying a compliment to the other person, leaving the other person alone, and doing something nice for the other person. By contrast, a fourth grader said he would tell the other person to *"just drop dead!"* Similarly, one high school boy said, *"for me, it's usually like, 'what'd you say? Fine! Go to Hell!'"* The older boys also said they would simply avoid talking, do nothing, walk away, and fight it out. One high school girl observed, *"I think guys are much more ready to fight, but I know a lot of girls who are like that too, but I think the majority of women would rather talk things out."*

In response to the question of how girls experience conflict, our participants indicated that girls' fights/conflicts were primarily about boys, physical possessions or characteristics, territorial issues (chairs, desks, etc. in the classroom), and friendship. One fifth grade boy asserted that *"girls can fight about anything,"* while a fifth grade girl provided the following overview:

> *[Girls get into conflict over] stupid stuff. Books on a desk. If someone like puts the book on the wrong desk and then someone says it isn't theirs and shoves [it] in the corner, someone gets really mad. I remember one time, I came in the room, and I was in this fight with another girl, and I just sat there and she came up to me with her notebook and said I wrote in it "____, I don't like you!" and I said, "No, I didn't. I don't even have that kind of pen and besides, even if I did, I wouldn't write that!" And she was just trying to get me in trouble.*

The problem of rumors, mentioned earlier, was particularly associated with girls. One sixth grade girl complained that people were spreading the rumor that she was/is anorexic. For another sixth grade girl, being the subject matter for gossip was a sensitive issue:

> *When you make a mistake, and people think it's ten times worse and they won't stop talking about it and I get really mad. And a lot of people do that. So, it's almost to the point that you feel like you have to be perfect.*

Our middle school participants echoed similar sentiments: *"if you go around talking about people, that's when they get mad--especially girls."* According to another girl in that group, *"it seems like boys talk about sports and that girls are catty, and it gets them in trouble."* The boy in that group added, *"they don't keep their mouths shut. They don't know how."* Comments from boys in other groups seemed to support a general view (at least among the boys) that conflicts between girls concerned only trivial issues and emerged from the girls' **talk** (as opposed to boys' conflicts which emerged from their **activity**).

While there seemed to be a general consensus as to the causes of conflict for girls, there was less consensus concerning how girls respond to conflict. On the one hand, girls were thought to be more likely to engage in arguing than in hitting, and it was believed that girls would attempt, more so than boys, to find a reasonable solution to their conflicts. On the other hand, a variety of claims were offered about girls hitting, swearing, screaming and holding grudges for extended periods of time. Interestingly, the most pronounced discussion of girls hitting occurred in one of our middle school groups and concerned conflicts between boys and girls:

ER: *What's it like when girls and boys get in fights or disagree? How's that different?*

F2: *Guys won't hit you back!*

F1: *Well, some guys will!*

F2: *They know better than to hit me back, though.*

F1: *But some guys take girls for granted. Like, "oh, if I slightly hit any girl she won't hit me back." But most of us hit back, and they lay off.*

Admittedly, with respect to most of their conflicts, the more typical responses, mentioned by girls across all grade levels, were apologizing, leaving the other person alone, trying to be nicer, and direct communication (e.g., *"ask them what did I do? What's wrong? What can I do to make you feel better about the thing I did wrong?"*).

Ultimately, we observed very few differences between what our boys and what our girls said about their conflicts. As already noted, the problems of the rumor-mill seemed to be associated a bit more with girls (although boys often served as subject matter for the rumors). Otherwise, each group was described as, among many other things, (1) holding grudges longer, (2) willing to engage in name calling, (3) willing to engage in physical confrontations, (4) willing to verbally engage or to totally avoid the other party, and (5) possessing a wide array of tactics/strategies for handling conflictual situations.

What is "Fair"?

The exchange which follows occurred in our fourth grade focus group:

ER: *When you're dealing with your friends, what does it mean to be fair?*

M3: *Some days it doesn't mean anything.*

M2: *Like, treating them the way you want to be treated. Well, maybe not as the Golden Rule. More like the Copper Rule. It's not always as important as other stuff.*

This exchange was, in some respects, unique among and, in other respects, emblematic of those we received in response to the basic question: *"what does it mean to be fair?"* The majority of responses fell into one of two themes: decision making according to the rules and equality of treatment.

As might be expected, there was a strong correspondence between the types of conflicts which the students discussed and their definitions of fair. Among the younger students, in particular, where the focus of their conflict discussion had been on the playground, fair was frequently described in terms of adherence to rules and, even more specifically, "correct" (or "honest") decision making. For example, a third grader described the unfair situation of being called "out" in baseball when you are actually "safe." A sixth grader provided a similar depiction (but with the focus on fair as opposed to unfair): *"when you play sports and everything, when someone touches the ball and you know he's out and he admits it--that he's out."*

Throughout all the grade levels, statements were made which associated fairness with equality of treatment. Our second graders spoke of sharing money with friends and not taking more than a "fair share" of snacks. Among our third graders, the notion of equality was presented in an exchange which reflected, in part, the fact that this group, as much or perhaps even more than any of the other groups, spoke of conflicts in terms of fighting:

M1: *If, like, someone hits you, you get to hit them back.*

F1: *That's not fair!*

ER: *Why do you think that?*

F1: *Because if there's a person who's littler than you, and you hit them harder, you could hurt them.*

M1: *You hit them as hard as you can.*

With our sixth grade group, the definitions of fairness often centered around expectations with respect to the behaviors of the teachers. The following statements were offered as definitions of fairness:

M1: *When someone does something to you, you tell the teacher and they punish them for what they did.*

M4: *When the teacher does the same thing to both people.*

F1: *If someone starts the trouble, they should get in trouble.*

Finally, our high school students appeared to recognize that fairness could not be defined in terms of meeting personal wants; however, equality was still expressed as a guiding principle:

M1: *You can't always get what you want; each person's got a right.*

F1: *I agree. You can't always blame someone else.*

F3: *[Fair is] everybody getting the same amount.*

CONCLUSION

The questions which brought us to this research project concerned children's experiences of and reactions to conflict. We wondered what meaning the word "conflict" held for the participants in our focus groups and what role they saw conflict playing in their lives. We were curious about how they would describe their own approaches to conflictual situations, as well as their descriptions of the approaches/reactions of others.

If we had any doubts that children's experiences of and reactions to conflict are different from the experiences/reactions of adults, those doubts were answered almost immediately by the children, themselves. As one of our fourth graders pointed out (in response to the question "what would you like to learn about dealing with conflict"), *"we're younger; we don't know how to act like adults."*

Perhaps the most revealing information concerning our participants' perceptions of their conflicts was contained in the metaphoric images they shared with us. Two primary, and in some respects oppositional, metaphors emerged in the group discussions: conflict as an explosion and conflict as betrayal. These metaphors appeared to reflect the perceptions of both boys and girls, and cross age levels (although the betrayal metaphor was much stronger with our older participants).

The metaphor of conflict as an explosion is certainly not new to communication researchers or educators (see, for example, Hocker and Wilmot, 1991). This metaphor (and its associated image of fireworks) appeared in statements made by our third graders and continued through our sixth graders and even to the high school focus group. For example, one third grade boy explained that *"if you don't get into a fight for a long time, it sort of powers up. You get more strength; then, when someone tries something, POW!"* A sixth grader argued that, *"sometimes we just fight each other, you know, when we're really mad, just to get it out."* In a similar sense, a high school student asserted *"if you don't argue sometimes, you'll be a basket case, you know? It'll build up and it will explode."* In these

responses, our participants offered a blurred vision of the line distinguishing conflict from aggression. What was particularly interesting, however, was the fact that these were positive claims made concerning the value of conflict. Our participants spoke of conflict as a release, and as a mechanism for escaping boredom. This is not to say that the explosion metaphor was universally positive; however, it certainly did not have the overwhelmingly negative image typically associated with it when used in adult discussions.

By contrast, the "darkside" of conflict was contained in the metaphor of conflict as a betrayal. This metaphor emerged especially in discussions of rumors and stealing friends/boy friends, as well as in occasional mentions of the need to *"protect your back."* This particular metaphor, with its cynical view of relationships and human nature, emerged more strongly in our older groups. The central argument appeared to be that you have to assume responsibility for protecting yourself (and perhaps your friends) from gossip, lies, and attempts to get you into trouble, especially with teachers/administrators. One middle school girl observed that *"you've got to watch your own back. If you get yourself into trouble, you've got to get yourself out."* One of our high school students argued that *"no one understands that you have to mind your own business. It's like take care of your own before someone stabs you in the back."* There was a paradoxical element to the conditions which supported this metaphor. As noted in our discussion of conflict as a product of the spoken word, students openly complained about rumors and talking *"behind someone's back,"* yet also openly discussed the futility of direct communication because the expectation was that the other person would not be honest about the situation.

In many respects, we realize that we have only just begun to appreciate the information that our focus group participants shared with us and the complexity/richness of their experiences. Certainly, there are other ways of looking at this data. We have tried to address the general themes which emerged in their talk about conflict and, at the same time, to be sensitive to the different voices which existed in those discussions. As we (and others) examine data of this nature in the future, there will be a need to

come grips with many of the contradictory voices which we heard, e.g., the voices which declared differences in boys and girls experiences of/responses to conflict, yet described boys and girls as sharing many of the same conflict "triggers" and as reacting to conflict in very similar ways. Certainly, there will be a need to engage in a triangulation of perspectives, comparing the perspectives of the children with those of their teachers and their parents. There are also other groups (for example, "special needs" children) whose distinctive situations and points of view should be examined.

As school officials, parents, and other groups seek constructive responses to the growing incidence of violent confrontations between/among children, there will be a continuing need to listen to the voices of the children themselves. In any number of other venues (e.g., small group dynamics, organizational management), theorists and consultants have long argued for the value and appropriateness (even the necessity) of enabling the involved parties to define and solve problems for themselves. That is, in many respects, the very essence of the process of dispute mediation. As we seek to implement conflict management and peer mediation programs within school systems, this same respect for the perspectives and understandings of the involved parties (i.e., the children) should be present.

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TABLE #1:
COMPOSITION OF STUDENT FOCUS GROUPS

GRADE LEVEL/SCHOOL	NUMBER OF BOYS	NUMBER OF GIRLS
2nd Grade	4	3
3rd Grade	3	1
4th Grade	4	3
5th Grade	4	4
6th Grade	4	3
Middle School Group 1	1	4
Middle School Group 2	1	2
High School	3	3

APPENDIX A:
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR CHILDREN'S FOCUS GROUPS

1. What are the kinds of things that cause you and other kids at school to not get along with each other or to have conflicts with each other?
2. What happens when you don't get along?
3. How do you know when another kid at school is upset with you?
4. How do you let other kids know that you are upset with them?
5. What do you do to try to make up?
6. Who do you go to for advice when you have problems with another kid at school?
7. Are there any differences in the kinds of conflicts that boys get into and the kinds of conflicts that girls get into?
8. We want you to role play for just a minute. Imagine that you are the teacher and we are new students in school. What would you teach us about conflict?
9. What have been the best things that your teachers have taught you about conflict?
10. What would you want us to teach you about conflict?
11. What does it mean to be "fair"?

ENDNOTES

1. Bies and Moag (1986) argue for the specification of a third dimension: interactional justice (i.e., the nature of the specific interactions which occur during conflicts and/or decision making).

2. The following additional information might be of interest/assistance in developing a picture of the school system: the minority student population was approximately 4%; pupil attendance rate was 94%; staff attendance rate was 96%; level of drop outs was 2.3% with a graduation rate in excess of 90%; and, college preparation graduates constituted 70%. (All the preceding data was provided by the Superintendent of the school system and is for the academic year in which the study was conducted.)

3. One of the responsibilities which we agreed to undertake in exchange for access to the school system was that of preparing a "needs-assessment" with respect to such a program and providing recommendations concerning a program or approach which we deemed appropriate for the system.

4. In the elementary schools, all focus groups were by grade level. With respect to the middle school and high school, the composition of the focus groups crossed grade levels.

5. We considered a variety of other approaches for obtaining participants, including the possibility of doing a blanket distribution of letters/permission forms to all parents. However, the recommendation/preference of school officials was to follow the approach which we have described here. Admittedly, several problems ultimately emerged. One teacher, for example, described several of his students as having disposed of the letters and permission requests in the nearest trash can.

6. The selected scene shows the character Belle wandering into a forbidden part of the castle. When the Beast discovers her there, he responds angrily and, in fear, she runs away. A short distance from the castle, Belle and her horse are attacked by wolves. The Beast, who has followed her, rescues her from the wolves, getting injured in the process. Belle helps the Beast back to the castle. As she nurses his wounds, they engage in a "conflict" concerning whose fault the situation is, with both eventually extending words of apology and appreciation to the other.

7. We have conducted focus groups with teachers at each of the schools; however, the emphasis of the analysis offered here is on the perspectives of the children. Discussion of responses to questions concerning lessons taught/desired will not be presented in this paper but, rather, will be reserved for a forum in which that information can be examined in light of what teachers within the system indicate are the lessons taught and the lessons needed.

8. The researchers gratefully extend their appreciation and acknowledgement to Karli Schumacher who created the original transcriptions of the focus groups and to the Ohio University Honors Tutorial Program whose undergraduate research associate grant program permitted us to employ Karli's services.

9. In keeping with our promise of anonymity, both the nickname and the student's true last name have been changed; however, the nature of the rhyming play on the student's last name has been preserved.

10. The letter "M" has been used to indicate a male speaker and "F" to indicate a female speaker. Individual identification numbers have been assigned to the members of each group but are not maintained across groups (i.e., the number 1 has been used to identify a sixth grade male and a second grade male; obviously, they are not the same males).

11. This statement should not be read as a claim that physical violence was nonexistent. Both boys and girls in our focus groups spoke of hitting, and admittedly, the transcripts of the group discussions contain frequent references to "fighting" or being "in a fight". However, in many cases, the phrasing seemed to reflect more the fact that a state of disagreement existed than the presence of physical encounters.